

TESTIMONY TO LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE ON  
INDIAN EDUCATION AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

MARCH 23, 2012

(Speaking in the Crow language, which is my first and will always be my preferred language.) Hello, my Crow name is Medicine Rock Chief. My anglo name is Leonard Bends. I am from the land of the Greasy Grass and the Heart of Crow Country, Lodge Grass, Montana. I am a member of the Tribe of the Long Beak Bird (the Crow Nation) and a citizen of the State of Montana.

I come before you with a **College Degree** in my left hand and my **"sacred feathers"** in my right hand. The College Degree is what I have learned and acquired from my non-Indian world. **The Sacred Feathers represents the Knowledge I have achieved in my Native world.**

The College Degree is an achievement which was set for me by my parents and my grandparents.

The Sacred Feathers is the knowledge I received from my parents and grandparents but also from my **Clan Aunts and My Clan Uncles** and this teaching started the day I was born.

We, the members of the Crow Nation live in three worlds. First and foremost is the world of the Crow. A world of (1)Culture/tradition and (2)spiritual direction. A world the non-native world wants to understand yet cannot grasp. A world taught by **"word of mouth and action"** and not by "the written word". A world not taught by "philosophical ideologies" but by practical and spiritual/traditional values instilled since the beginning of time from our forefathers. Such experiences of our fathers were of sacrifices when they went to the mountains and fasted, giving up food and water for days waiting for visions from the **"Creator"**, who by his divine intervention, gave such visions to the person fasting for his future and the future of the tribe.

This vision was provided to the whole tribe and through those visions, the tribe survived.

This was the education not provided by books and by educated people but by simple

people who went to the wilderness and did what they had to do to help their people to survive. The world of today is the third world. Living in a world which is dominated by material possessions and pursuit of personal status and recognition.

I tell you this story not because we are making excuses but to help you understand the world of the Crow. It is also a way to help you understand the various ways of teaching their young. Many of the Tribes have assimilated to the ways of today. But for the Crow Tribe, we still practice in the ways of the old as a way of teaching our young that they are Crow first and to never forget our ways.

This has caused some conflict in the every day classroom in our school. Parents sometime have a decision to make to either keep practicing our way of beliefs and traditions or to drop the very essence of the Crow way of life or to pursue the academics, and most choose the latter.

The challenge of the Administrators of our school is actually three fold. And they are:

1. Do I allow students (probably very good students) to miss school when they are practicing traditional activities.
2. Do I start pushing for the Tribal Social Services to visit the families if this practice continues and is starting to affect the student(s) attendance and breaking attendance policy.
3. If the absenteeism is getting to be a problem and is starting to affect the whole classroom, should I consider suspending the student or even consider dropping the child until the parents and the student can be consistent with their absenteeism problem.

The domino effect of taking action on these types of students is causing school administrators major problems.

The challenges we faced in the days when I was a child growing up in an isolated, rural community are not the same challenges faced today by this generation of parents and kids. The traditional practices problem is one of many problems that fall into the problems the School Administrators and the District Board of Trustees have to deal with on a daily basis.

The Social problems that have to be dealt with, such as the unemployment rate, housing

problems, alcoholism and drug problems and not withstanding the health of tribal members, especially diabetes, that exist on reservations deeply affect each child. When there are two to three families in a two bedroom house, with just one bathroom and only one of the families is working, it is a very stressed situation for these young kids. No wonder absenteeism and tardiness rates are so high. The Lodge Grass Schools for example, the absenteeism rates for the last four years are as follows:

<u>Grades:</u>	<u>2006-2007</u>	<u>2007-2008</u>	<u>2008-2009</u>	<u>2009-2010</u>
9	68.5%	69.5%	73%	69.5%
10	74%	72%	76.5%	71%
11	75%	72%	76%	74.5%
12	<u>75.5%</u>	<u>73.5%</u>	<u>78.5%</u>	<u>75%</u>
Total for year:	73.25%	73.5%	76%	72.5%

How do we combat these problems or situations? There is no one answer for any of the situations. Unemployment on the Crow Reservation is at 76%. The United States unemployment rate is at 8% and the U.S. Congress is in a quagmire on how they need to stimulate the economy and bring the unemployment rate down. And here we are, on the Crow Reservation with a 76% unemployment rate and the kids have to deal with that everyday.

These problems are having a major effect on the Graduation Rates at Lodge Grass High School and of the other local schools. Not only are these situations a contributor to the Graduation Rates but to the Drop Out Rates. The non-Indian schools have three to four times less than the rates at Lodge Grass. The following is the statistics for Drop-out Rates:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Lodge Grass Schools</u>	<u>Non-Indian Schools (OPI)</u>
2007-2008	29.5%	5.20%
2008-2009	21.5%	5.10%
2009-2110	12.8%	4.30%
2010-2011	17.1%	?

does affect them.

Montana Office of Public Instruction was to "tag" Lodge Grass High School as a failure.

Their answer was to force the District to be part of the School Improvement Grant.

Regulations and policies of the Grant "**offended**" the community in such a way that they felt helpless. When the staff for Grant was selected, the District had no say and to move the Principal from his position was a real bad "pill" to swallow. Funds were promised to the district which did happen but not the way the community was led to believe. The Grant did not work for Lodge Grass Schools. The School District Board felt deceived and were not very happy about the abrupt "exit" by the Office of Public Instruction. The District had to readjust everything and start anew again.

The Lodge Grass School did and will continue to survive. This year, the Board of Trustees, along with the present Administration, have made major changes within the school, both Elementary and High School. Positive changes are occurring. The Board of Trustees has made a commitment to turn the School around and it is happening. We will be a success story.

Thank you very much for this opportunity.

# **Model School Characteristics and Challenges Facing Montana's Public Schools**

**Prepared by the MTSBA Indian School Board Caucus for the  
Interim Education and Local Government Committee**

## **Background:**

Over the last two years, MTSBA member trustees have met on several occasions to develop, refine and update a summary document to identify the desired characteristics of model public schools in Montana and identify the most important challenges faced by Montana's public schools in pursuing the innovations necessary to meet the needs of today's and tomorrow's children.

This document is an excerpt of Indian School Districts issues that is a part of a master document covering schools of various sizes, locations and circumstances, including:

1. AA School Districts;
2. A School Districts;
3. B School Districts;
4. C School Districts;
5. Independent Elementary School Districts; and
6. School Districts Predominantly Serving American Indian Children (Indian School Board Caucus).

The characteristics of model schools and identification of challenges in this document are prepared from notes taken during a series of facilitated sessions that took place in June 2010, October 2010 and June 2011. We plan to continue to refine and update this resource going forward and we have had a great response from trustees interested in continuing to lead this discussion in the future.

Our intention in maintaining this resource is to ensure a continually-updated contemporary snapshot of the collective beliefs, ideas and goals of elected school board leaders throughout the state regarding Montana's public schools.

The summary below reflects the discussions and input of several elected school board leaders from Indian School Districts throughout Montana over the last two years. These trustees discussed the commonalities and differences in their respective districts and work to identify a model description of success for their applicable category of district. The participating trustees also identified potential barriers to success that impact the ongoing efforts of these leaders to incorporate the characteristics of a model public school in the schools of their respective districts.

## **Part I: Characteristics of a Model Indian Public School in Montana**

The participating trustees identified a wide range of characteristics of a successful public school in Montana. The most frequently cited characteristics are as follows:

### **Indian School Board Caucus (ISBC)**

#### **Characteristics of a Future Model School Predominately Serving American Indian Children**

- Every student is proficient in all subjects
- Parents are highly engaged in children's education
  - Encourage parents to come to weekly meetings, game nights, etc...
  - Create average parent rating of participation
  - A parent night where teachers show parents how they teach their student
  - Rewards for classes where the most parents come
  - Teacher contacts parent(s) at least every month
- Students have opportunities to be tutored in small groups or individually
- After school programs
- During school – parent volunteers for tutoring
- Most parent volunteer hours wins prize
- Students compete in reading fair, science fair, math fair, etc...
- Students pass classes, arrive on time, improve attendance, and behave appropriately
- Native Schools getting off school improvement. Once off:
  - Make AYP
  - Compliance with NCLB
  - Curriculum alignment
  - Consistency of curriculum
  - Basic life skills for students to succeed in their communities
  - Effective evaluations of educators
  - Accountability of educators
  - Improved attendance
  - Parent/Community involvement
- Best education possible
- Community expectations:
  - Children are in school
  - Involved in child's education
  - Support all school functions (not just basketball)
  - Support at parent-teacher conferences
- Ability to compete in a global economy
- Total success
- Success at addressing the issues of alcohol, drugs, gangs, domestic violence
- Dorm
- Happy learning students

- Big Open Door
- Extended programs/stay in school/ALC/Blackfoot Academy at school
- Student accountability/Senior to graduate/ need portfolio
- More collaboration among school districts
- Higher performance standards for teachers
- Fun, engaging PIR days
- Collaboration within school
- Close education gap

## **Part II: Some of the Key Challenges Faced by Montana's Indian Public Schools**

### **Indian School Board Caucus Challenges:**

- Understanding and respect for other cultures, not just Native Americans
  - Learn
  - share
- Local Government entities i.e. Tribal Council, having a vested interest in students
  - Lead by example
- Help to build self worth and confidence to cut down on substance abuse, suicides, and gang activity
- Local political leaders advocating to federal government for funding
  - Tribal council members
  - Town/county leaders
- Define all areas of politics at the federal, state, county, and city:
  - Tribal
  - Funding
  - Lobbying
- Political responsibility is to form a productive attitude for community, school district, staff, and children
- Stay connected with the trends of education system
- Tribal government needs to be educated on the following:
  - School district policies
  - Role in education of their children
  - School funding
- Social Values- Drugs, alcohol, unemployment, and gangs are still barriers
- Demographics
- Mobility rate
- Housing
- Obtaining quality teachers in remote areas
- College-parents move in for college then back home after education
- Transportation